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ABSTRACT

Since the Stonewall riots between gay men and police in New York City in 1969 and the lesbian manifestos of the Women's Liberation Movement in the early 1970s, there has been an intensification of the struggle to end the stigmatization of homosexuality. This study explored retrospectively the experience of mothers (N=10) who had learned that a daughter is a lesbian. The central question of this study was whether there was an identifiable sequence or process by which mothers came to accept a daughter's lesbianism and if this process paralleled the process of lesbian identity formation as previously described in research. Subjects were selected from a special group of mothers who were anticipated to have reached an advanced level of acceptance, as defined by these mothers' public disclosure through engaging in some activity supportive of parental acceptance and/or the gay civil rights movement. The results indicated that coming to terms with nonconforming gender role, or masculine-like appearance and behaviors in daughters and partners presented a major hurdle. Despite their public social and political engagement, the majority of the mothers interviewed reported that they continued to struggle with unresolved feelings towards homosexuality; that feelings of loss, concern over discrimination, and self-consciousness about themselves as the mother of a lesbian daughter persisted; and that they often wished their daughters were heterosexual. (Author/ABL)

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HETEROSEXUAL MOTHERS/LESBIAN DAUGHTERS: PARALLELS AND SIMILARITIES

By Sarah F. Pearlman, Psy.D.

ABSTRACT. This article is based on an interview study of ten Caucasian mothers who following disclosure of a daughter's lesbianism ultimately engaged in some activity supportive of parental acceptance and/or the gay civil rights movement. Findings showed that similar to their lesbian daughters, these mothers had assimilated the behaviors and coping skills of an oppressed and stigmatized group, and thus shared similar experiences as part of their acceptance process. In addition, these mothers' process of acceptance was found in many ways to parallel stage-based models of lesbian and homosexual identity formation. The article concludes with a discussion of prevalent issues in psychotherapy with both mothers and daughters.

INTRODUCTION

"When a large portion of those parents join in the crusade for their children's dignity, a significant slice of the nation's voters, fired by familial bonds will be dedicated to the most basic of freedoms, the right to be what one is." (Bernstein, 1988, p. A27).

Since the Stonewall riots between gay men and police in New York City in 1969 and the lesbian manifestos of the Women's

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Liberation Movement in the early 70's (Radicalesbians,1970), there has been an intensification of the struggle to end the stigmatization of homosexuality. Subsequent landmark events have included the removal of homosexuality from the official list of mental disorders by the American Psychiatric Association in 1973, and the passing of laws favorable to gay rights in cities and states across the nation. By the early 1980's, a new group had joined a gay male and lesbian political movement for the civil liberties of gay people -- mothers and fathers of lesbians and gay men.

This article is based on an interview study which was designed to explore retrospectively the experience of ten mothers who had learned that a daughter is a lesbian. The central question of the study was whether there is an identifiable sequence or process by which mothers come to accept a daughter's lesbian and if this process parallels the process of lesbian identity formation as described by Cass (1978). Thus, in order to understand this process of acceptance, I selected a special group of mothers whom I anticipated had reached an advanced level of acceptance, and which I defined by these mothers' public disclosure to others through engaging in some activitity supportive of parental acceptance and/or the gay civil rights movement.

What I hoped to learn through interviewing these ten women was an understanding of mothers of lesbians whom I believed had consciously worked to overcome societal prejudice and cope with their

own feelings in order to remain committed to their relationship with their daughter and to adjust to her lesbianism. I wanted to learn what factors or variables such as prior views on homosexuality, political beliefs, child rearing philosophy, and personality characteristics of these mothers assisted or delayed acceptance, what brought about their changes, and how they had come to engage in activities supportive of acceptance of other parents and/or the rights and well being of all lesbians and gay men.

Findings supported my expectations and demonstrated that these mothers' process of acceptance did have an identifiable, although nonlinear progression of feelings and behaviors which paralleled the identity formation process of their daughters. In addition, I found that following disclosure, these mothers began to assimilate the behaviors of an oppressed and stigmatized group (Allport, 1958) so that there were many similarities between these heterosexual mothers and their daughters. Thus, like their lesbian daughters (de Monteflores, 1988; Fein & Nuehring, 1987), these mothers learned similar coping skills, demonstrated similar behaviors, shared similar experiences, and reported significant marker events as part of their acceptance process.

METHOD

To have access to each mother's story, I interviewed and audio-taped each woman separately during both an initial and a follow-up

interview. I began the first interview by completing a demographic form designed to give information about each mother's ethnic background, her educational, employment, and political history, religious beliefs, and current activities. I then asked each mother to tell me her story about learning of her daughter's lesbianism and how she became accepting enough to engage in activities which publically identified her as a parent of a lesbian, and was supportive of parental acceptance and/or the gay civil rights movement. This was followed by a series of questions formulated to understand the sequence of feelings, thinking, behaviors, and the milestone events which followed disclosure, and led to seeking social support and ultimately engaging in social activism.

Demographic information and questions were based on information and findings in the literature (Borhek, 1983; Bernstein, 1990; Neisen, 1987; Wirth, 1978) on parents' reactions and struggles to accept a child's homosexuality as well as studies which related acceptance to tolerance of nonconformity and diversity, liberal political views, identification as a feminist, and a history of social and political activism (Irwin & Thompson, 1977; Minnergerode, 1976; Muller, 1987; Rafkin, 1988).

Background and Characteristics of the Participants

The ten women who participated in the study lived in New England, had known of their daughter's lesbianism from three to

seventeen years, and were all Caucasian and heterosexual. Their ages ranged from forty-seven to seventy-five, and all but one were sixty-five or under. Six women were Protestant and identified their backgrounds as WASP, two were Jewish, one was Italian/Catholic, and one was Middle Eastern in descent. Four of the mothers in the study had Masters degrees and three had attained Bachelor degrees.

Seven mothers were currently married, one was widowed, and two were divorced. Three mothers were employed in counseling and social work fields, one worked in realty, a second in media relations, and a third in an antique shop. Of the remaining four mothers, one was active as a volunteer in family planning, a second had retired from teaching, and two had worked primarily within the home as wife and mother.

Experience in Social Justice Causes

Six mothers had been involved in liberal movements or social justice causes prior to disclosure. These included the environment, anti-Vietnam war, anti-nuclear, civil rights, and poor peoples movements. Involvement included financial contribution, organizational membership, letter writing to state and federal representatives, and participating in demonstrations and vigils. In addition, one mother had been involved in education and job training with Japanese-Americans interred in detention camps during World War II, and had also sheltered draft evaders during the Vietnam War.

Five mothers identified themselves as feminist, and one stated that she could be a feminist. All mothers expressed that they were concerned with womens' issues, most specifically the right to abortion and equality of opportunity for women. Thus, there are limitations to the generalizibility of the study since all subjects were white, and most were educated beyond the high school level and had a history of social activism.

Current Activities on Behalf of Parents, Lesbians, and Gay Men

All participants were members of and/or attended Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-FLAG) meetings, and thus all mothers were publicly disclosed as the mother of a lesbian within a network of other parents. One mother had been a founder of one of the first P-FLAG groups in the country (a federated offshoot of parents of gays groups), five of these mothers had joined P-FLAG within a year and a half of disclosure, and three mothers had participated in a support group for parents of gays.

The activities these women were currently involved in were primarily focused on outreach to parents of lesbians and gays and campaigning within their churches for acceptance and inclusion of homosexuals. One mother, a Quaker, was responsible for her Meeting (the Quaker term for congregation) giving meeting space to parents of gays; gay Catholics (Dignity); gay and lesbian adolescents; and transsexuals and transvestites, as well as allowing a marriage between

two women to take place. Other mothers were involved in counseling gay people, establishing social services for gay and lesbian youth, attempting to organize workshops on gay issues and homophobia in public schools and agencies, establishing a gay and lesbian community center, or participating in pride demonstrations. Seven mothers were involved in at least three different activities on behalf of parents and lesbians and gays. And one mother had worn a button to a town event which stated, "I may be straight, but I'm not narrow".

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

> And like a young tree, I see you sway and bend,
> And I'm so afraid, afraid you might break,
> Tossed by the wind, the storms that come your way,
> And careless strangers, seeing fruit, who reach out to take ...
>
> But we're not one, we're worlds apart,
> We're worlds apart ...
>
> Rosalie Sorrels (1984, p. 11)

Mothers' Process of Acceptance

Findings from the interviews of these ten mothers affirmed numerous books (Back, 1985; Borhek, 1983; Fairchild & Hayward, 1979; Griffin and Wirth, 1986; Muller, 1987; Rafkin, 1988), articles (Bernstein, 1990; Neisen,1987; Wirth, 1978; Zitter, 1987) and

dissertations (Gold, 1988; Powers, 1987) which described parents' struggle to accept a child's homosexuality. Thus, findings showed that following disclosure, most mothers experienced a stage-based sequence of confusion, devastation and loss, struggle to come to terms with their daughter's lesbianism, increasing tolerance, and finally an acceptance accompanied by residual regret. This process included a variety of events or milestones, such as exposure to other lesbians and gay men, growing awareness of the effects of homosexual stigmatization and frequency of parental rejection, changing views and beliefs on homosexuality, movement towards increasing disclosure to others, and growing involvement on behalf of parents of gays and/or in social services and political activities on behalf of lesbians and gay men.

Prior to disclosure, the majority of the mothers interviewed claimed that they had no knowledge of their daughter's lesbianism, yet they also related that they had suspected or wondered if their daughter was a lesbian, but had dismissed these thoughts. These suspicions were based on lesbian stereotypes, and these mothers reported that they had observed that their daughters' behaviors and appearance did not conform to the traditional female role, that daughters were involved in feminist activities, were expressing anti-male statements, engaging in intense relationships with women, living in households with lesbians, or had confided attraction to a woman. Thus, although these mothers related that they had no prior

suspicions, in retrospect, they had attributed a lesbian meaning to the above behaviors.

All but two of the mothers interviewed described disclosure as a personal crisis and reported intense feelings of devastation and loss. The two mothers who did not experience disclosure as a crisis related that they had suspected that their daughters were lesbian, but that feelings of relief followed disclosure in that being told resulted in a closer relationship with their daughters. Most mothers coped with disclosure through denial of permanance; that is, they hoped that their daughter's lesbianism was temporary or a stage. Also, most of these women encouraged their daughters to seek counseling in order to be certain that they were indeed lesbian, or arranged family counseling in order to understand the situation and mediate conversation.

All of the mothers interviewed had multiple fears and concerns regarding their daughters' lesbianism. These ranged from concerns over daughters' safety and well-being to the effect of societal discrimination, and how they as parents would be regarded or affected. Four mothers expressed profound concerns which were focused on daughters or partners whose appearance and dress did not conform to traditional sex role norms, and identified these concerns as a major hindrance to acceptance.

All but one mother searched for explanations or causes of their daughters' lesbianism, and attempted to find reasons in childrearing mistakes, or family relationships such as daughters growing up in

homes dominated by their fathers. Thus, these mothers had internalized traditional psychological concepts that early family relationships and interactions are causal or contributing factors to homosexuality. The mothers who feared that family relationships might have caused a daughter to become lesbian said that they were much relieved upon learning or deciding that lesbianism was genetically based.

Most mothers had no significant exposure to or relationships with homosexuals prior to disclosure, and reported negative views of homosexuality and stereotypical images of lesbians and gay men which were connected to cross-gender behaviors and appearance. At the time of the interview, all mothers had met or knew several lesbians and gay men, and related that their beliefs and attitudes towards homosexuality and gay people had been modified in that both stereotypes and the centrality of homosexuality were diminished. In addition, the majority of mothers stated that they believed that their daughters were happy as lesbians and led good lives, and several mothers expressed positive views of lesbianism as a life style which offered more relationship intimacy and community support than is available to most heterosexual women.

All but one of the mothers interviewed identified parents' support groups, P-FLAG and reading as the major influences or factors which helped with understanding and tolerance of their daughters' lesbianism. While reading provided information and parents' groups

offered support, it was P-FLAG which gave opportunity to meet lesbians and gay men, to hear their stories of parental rejection and societal discrimination, and to meet other parents who had not only come to terms with their child's homosexuality, but were involved in social and political activism.

Thus, while the decision to become involved in activities supportive of acceptance was initially based on love and concern for their lesbian daughter, the direction of concern expanded and began to include the well-being and civil rights of all gay people. However, the majority of mothers expressed a residual ambivalence which was based on discomfort over daughters' behaviors, regret that daughters would not fulfill the expected heterosexual role, and ongoing concern over the impact of societal discrimination and prejudice. Yet each of the mothers interviewed indicated some next step, plan or wish in regard to her daughter's lesbianism. These included wishes to become more accepting or to disclose to additional people, or plans to engage in additional activity on behalf of parents, lesbians, and gay men.

In summary, the majority of mothers interviewed related a sequence of feelings and concerns, and behaviors which were motivated and shaped by the wish to reduce grief, to maintain relationship with their daughter, and to understand and come to terms with their daughters' lesbianism. While these mothers told many stories, a common story was that to reduce their grief and confusion and increase tolerance of their daughters' lesbianism, they sought out

both information and social support through joining parents' groups. Contact with other parents and involvement with P-FLAG initiated activity on behalf of other parents of gays, and then on behalf of the rights and well-being of all gay people.

In addition, these mothers reported that their daughters' lesbianism gradually became less central, and they began to respond to them as individuals and the person they were. Overall, mothers reported that commitment and love for their daughters, time, information, disclosure to others, exposure to lesbians and gay men, meeting other parents, social or political activism, and spiritual values which taught tolerance for diversity and were contrary to discrimination were among the major factors which assisted acceptance of their daughter's lesbianism.

Parallels and Similarities

Central to the question of the study was that these mothers' narratives revealed that disclosure initiated an identifiable sequence of reactions and behaviors which closely parallels the identity formation process (Cass, 1978) and experiences of lesbians and gay men (Table 1). In addition, they began to share many similar experiences as their lesbian daughter (Table 2).

Similar to many lesbian's experience of initial awareness of same sex attraction, the majority of the mothers interviewed reacted to disclosure in a context of internalized and exaggerated stereotypes

of homosexuality, so that learning that their daughter was a lesbian was predictive of and resulted in a profound personal and family crisis. Also, awareness of oneself as a parent of a gay child then defined the mothers in the study as different from parents of heterosexual children, and they began to adopt the identical strategies and behavioral decisions as their lesbian daughters such as concealment of their child's lesbianism, passing as the parent of heterosexual children, and deciding about who and when to disclose. Thus, the mothers in the study demonstrated that, as parents of a gay child, and like their daughters, they had begun to assimilate the behaviors of an oppressed and stigmatized group.

Similar to their daughters, these mothers related that they needed to manage controlling information, editing conversation, and fears of being found out as well as tolerating insults and verbal prejudice against homosexuals. Other adjustments meant accepting uncomfortable interactions with heterosexual friends and family members, and grieving a variety of losses for their gay daughter such as physical safety and heterosexual relationship privileges.

Thus, as counterpart to the identity formation process of their gay daughter (Fein & Neuhring, 1982), the mothers interviewed related that recognition of themselves as parents of a gay child meant developing new coping skills, learning psychological tolerance of

Table 1
Similarities and Sequence of Stages: Lesbian Identity Formation and Mothers' Process of Acceptance

Stage I. Identity Confusion	Stage I. Parental Confusion
Awareness of same sex attraction	Disclosure by daughter
Personal identity crisis	Personal crisis as a result of disclosure
Begins to identify potentially as a lesbian	Denial and devastation; feels permanency is unbearable
Asks, "Am I a heterosexual or a lesbian?"	Asks, "Is she a lesbian?"
Stage II. Identity Comparison	**Stage II. Parental Comparsion: Losses and Fears**
Feelings of difference, personal alienation, and not belonging	Feelings of difference, social isolation, and not belonging
Life guidelines and expectations no longer relevant	Loss of expectations of marriage and grandchildren
Consequences of lesbianism seem intolerable	Consequences of daughters' lesbianism seem intolerable
"Passing" through control of information	Concealment of daughter's lesbianism
May seek counseling	Family counseling; attempts to have daughter see a counselor

Table 1 (cont.)

Stage III. Identity Tolerance	Stage III. Parental Tolerance
Seeks social support	Seeks information and social support
Decreased alienation	Decreased isolation
Rewarding participation in lesbian sub-culture	Reduced grief
New role models make lesbianism more acceptable	Role models of parental acceptance; meeting lesbians and gay men "normalizes" homosexuality and creates incongruency with social beliefs on pathology
Stage IV. Identity Acceptance	**Stage IV. Parental Acceptance**
Additional disclosure to others	Accepts probable permanency
Positive relationships help to evaluate lesbianism more positively	Sees daughter apart from lesbianism and recognizes her happiness
Participation in lesbian sub-culture "normalizes" identity and way of life	Increased awareness and reaction to parental rejection and homosexual oppression
	Social/political activism on behalf of parents and gay people

Table 1 (cont.)

Stage V. Identity Pride	Stage V. Parental Pride/ Parental Ambivalence
Positive acceptance of lesbian identity	Increased comfort with and acceptance of daughters' lesbianism
Devalues heterosexuals and idealizes lesbians in order to reduce incongruence between self-acceptance and societal rejection	New sense of self as a result of engagement in activism
Increased disclosure	Increased disclosure
Separates from heterosexual culture	Pride in gay daughter and recognition of positive aspects of lesbianism
	Residual ambivalence and focus on personal concerns
Stage VI. Identity Synthesis	**Stage VI. Parental Synthesis**
Participates in heterosexual culture	Unambivalent acceptance of the permanency of a daughters' lesbianism
Heterosexuals less devalued, lesbians less idealized	Residual ambivalence focused on societal homophobia

Table 2
Lesbian Daughters/Heterosexual Mothers: Similarities in Behaviors and Experiences

Lesbian Daughters	Heterosexual Mothers
Out of mainstream	Social isolation
Experience difference	Experience difference
Have a secret	Have a secret
Fear of being found out	Fear of being found out
Learn deceptive interactions	Learn deceptive interactions
"Pass" and conceal	"Pass" and conceal
Make decisions on disclosure	Make decisions on disclosure
Tolerate decrease in intimacy and authenticity when un-disclosed	Tolerate decrease in intimacy and authenticity when un-disclosed
Tolerate social tension after disclosure	Tolerate social tension after disclosure
Tolerate homophobic insults and social discrimination	Tolerate homophobic insults and effect of social discrimination
Grieve loss of heterosexual privilege	Grieve loss of traditional daughter and grandchildren

Table 2 (cont.)

Lesbian Daughters/Heterosexual Mothers: Similarities in Behaviors and Experiences

Decision to tell parents	Decision to tell parents
Find a new community	Find a new reference group
Re-surfacing sorrow due to homosexual hatred and oppression	Residual regret due to personal losses and societal discrimination

devaluation of homosexuals, grieving, adjusting to multiple losses, and eventually seeking new relational or supportive networks.

Similar to their daughters (Neymeyer, 1980) and although disclosure to others was their hardest task, the mothers in the study began to identify disclosure as a critical factor in asserting acceptance of their daughters' lesbianism as well as self-acceptance as a parent of a gay person. These women, therefore, began to understand that disclosure is a part of true intimacy in relationship, and because of connection with other parents through P-FLAG, began to disclose that their daughters were lesbians. In addition, similar to the struggle for self-acceptance of their lesbian daughters (Sophie, 1982), these mothers demonstrated also that the most stable bases and foundation of self-acceptance as the parent of a lesbian were social support, disclosure, positive philosophy on homosexuality, affiliation, activism, and reward (Table 3).

However, as these women experienced negative responses from others, like their lesbian daughters, they needed to decide again whom to disclose to, as well as to weigh the consequences of disclosure such as social rejection and insult. Mothers in the study reflected also the dilemma of coming out to their parents, and tended to prolong disclosure or continue to conceal their daughters' lesbianism from their own parents.

Corresponding to the importance of marker events as part of the lesbian identity formation of their daughters (Berzon, 1979),

mothers in this study reported significant marker events as part of their acceptance process Table 4). The significant events these mothers reported was learning that their daughter was a lesbian, acknowledging the probable permanency of their daughter's lesbianism, their first experience of meeting their daughter's partner, the first disclosure to a non-gay person, the first visit to a daughter's shared domicile with a lover, first participation in a parents support group, first attendance at P-FLAG, first meeting with lesbians and gay men; first engaging in social and/or political events and activities on behalf of parental acceptance and civil rights of lesbians and gay men, additional disclosures to family, friends, and co-workers, and increased comfort with affection between a daughter and her partner.

These significant events suggest that the following aspects of acceptance may determine the overall level of mothers' acceptance: (1) recognition that a daughter is a lesbian, but retaining hopes that it will change; 2) accepting the permanency of a daughter's lesbianism; (3) accepting that a daughter is in a relationship with a women; (4) accepting affectionate behaviors between a daughter and her partner, and (5) accepting that a daughter is sexual with a women or women.

In addition, both mothers and their lesbian daughters struggled with similar feelings of loss and residual sorrow. While mothers experienced loss of commonality based on traditional sex role interests and activities, lesbian daughters often feel a similar loss of connection

Table 3
Foundations for Consolidation of Positive Self-Acceptance as a Lesbian and Mothers' Positive Acceptance of a Daughters' Lesbianism

Lesbian Daughters	Heterosexual Mothers
Social support	Social support
Affiliation and belonging	Affiliation and belonging
Self-disclosure as a lesbian	Self-disclosure as a parent of a lesbian
Positive philosophy on lesbianism	Positive philosophy on lesbianism
Relational and life style rewards	Rewards based on activism and closeness with daughter
Social/political activism	Social/political activism
Political/historical analysis of homosexual intolerance	Political/historical analysis of homosexual intolerance

Table 4
Marker Events: Lesbian Identity Formation and Mothers' Process of Acceptance

Lesbian Daughters	Heterosexual Mothers
First same sex attraction	Daughter's disclosure as a lesbian
First sex	Recognizing probable permanency of a daughters' lesbiansm
First romantic relationship	Meeting a daughter's partner
First living with a lover	First visit to a daughter's shared home with a lover
First self-disclosures	First disclosure to a non-gay person
Disclosure to a mother	First parents group
First contact with lesbian community	First meeting lesbians and gay men
First activism or activist event	First social/political activism
	Increased comfort with affection between a daughter and her partner

and wish for common interests, and compare their relationship to their mothers with their heterosexual siblings. While mothers struggle with feelings of residual sorrow over the loss of dreams based on the heterosexuality of their daughters, their daughters too may have to manage a re-surfacing of residual sorrow as lesbians -- a non-neurotic response to the loss of heterosexual privelege and the chronic traumatizing of homosexuals who need to exist amidst a social context of institutionalized hatred.

Somewhat different than their daughters, the mothers in the study did not so much form a new identity, but rather expanded on their existing identity as a parent of a lesbian. The majority of these mothers expressed that they had a sense of difference from parents of heterosexual children and that their beliefs and values had undergone a transformation. Many of these women reported that their lives had been expanded and enriched as a result of a lesbian daughter. They had met wonderful new people, had a new sense of themselves as a public or political person, had learned new skills such as group leading and public speaking, and had established more open and communicative relationships with daughters and other family members. In addition, they were also rewarded through becoming parent role models, as well as parent surrogate figures for a variety of lesbians and gay men.

The Complexities of Acceptance

Findings from the study indicated that coming to terms with nonconforming gender role, or masculine-like appearance and behaviors in daughters and partners presented a major hurdle. Thus, an additional important aspect of acceptance appears to be accepting nontraditional gender role appearance and behaviors in a daughter and/or her partner, and most mothers were more accepting when daughters acted and dressed more conventionally, and did not publicly display affection towards partners.

In addition, the mothers in the study demonstrated that acceptance is a complex phenomenon, appears to be a matter of degree, and may never be complete. Societal belief systems that homosexuality is deviant, that parents are the cause, and that mothers are responsible for the personality outcome of their children are pervasive ideologies. Thus, despite their public social and political engagement, the majority of the mothers interviewed reported that they continued to struggle with unresolved feelings towards homosexuality, that feelings of loss, concern over discrimination, and self-consciousness about themselves as the mother of a lesbian daughter persisted, and that they often wished that their daughters were heterosexual.

Because of ongoing social discrimination and societal homophobia, most mothers related that they were constantly reminded of the handicap of being gay as well as the loss of a

heterosexual child. The majority of these women belonged to a generation that came of age and lived within a conventional social environment which was staunchly intolerant of both homosexuality and the breach of sex role rules. Unlike their lesbian daughters, they do not have options in terms of separating from this mileu.

Although part of a supportive reference group, many of these mothers reported that they needed to tolerate homosexual insult as well as feelings of marginality and alienation when conversations centered on heterosexual ritual events, or when being called upon to explain why a daughter remained unmarried. When these mothers attended weddings and bridal showers or when peers spoke of grandchildren, the loss of a dream of a married daughter with children would re-surface. These mothers then needed to deal with both the consequences of homosexual oppression and the loss of a heterosexual child; and although they do experience reward as a publicly identified parent of a homosexual, they do not have the compensations of the relational and life rewards of their gay children.

Residual regret and acceptance are not then mutually exclusive, but a reaction to the stresses of homosexual social discrimination and marginality in relation to heterosexuality, and a response of parents who exist within a heterosexual culture, and must mediate between their child and the heterosexual world.

Overall, findings from the study demonstrated that the mothers interviewed exhibited a wide variability in levels of acceptance, that

levels tended to overlap, and feelings and behaviors which appear contradictory can exist side by side. While all of the mothers were publically identified as the mother of a lesbian within a supportive network of parents and lesbians and gay men, some of these women had yet to come to terms with the permanence of their daughter's lesbianism, and remained focused on social support and meeting with other parents who understood and validated their feelings of pain and confusion. Other mothers, while engaged in the lesbian/gay civil rights movement, had yet to become comfortable with disclosure or affectional behavior between their daughter and her partner -- or with nontraditional appearance and behaviors of daughters and their partners, and continued to struggle with residual concerns and regrets that their daughter was gay.

Factors and Characteristics which Assist or Delay Acceptance

The mothers who appeared to accept most easily were women who had completed college, were involved in work while their children were growing up, had been involved in liberal political activity and social justice causes, and identified as feminist. In addition, these women had become closer to their daughters following disclosure, were able to relate to daughters through commonality of beliefs and interests, and liked their daughters' partners. They described their parenting as permissive, believed that parents needed to accept their children's individuality and choices, and had

experienced some positive exposure to gay men or lesbians prior to disclosure. Also, most of these mothers were influenced by religious teachings which valued acceptance of diversity and human rights, and were critical of any discrimination of minority groups.

The mothers who appeared to struggle the most, who reacted most strongly to disclosure, and whose process of coming to terms appeared to be most delayed and painful were women who did not attain a college education and did not work outside the home while their children were growing up. They had no prior involvement in political or social justice causes, had little or no exposure to lesbians and gay men, and little or limited life experience aside from their immediate social environment and extended family. These women experienced a deep sense of loss of a traditional daughter; that is, one who would marry, have children, remain in close contact, and become part of their extended family.

Two of these mothers related that disclosure was followed by increasing estrangement and that they discovered that their daughters had become uncomfortably different. Their daughters now had radical feminist beliefs, dressed and behaved outside the stereotypic feminine role, and disliked heterosexually oriented events and family occasions. These mothers found both their daughters' and partners' opinions and beliefs unusual and extreme, and had concerns about their daughters and/or partners appearing too masculine, or stereotypically lesbian. They did not like their daughter's partners

and found them to be opinionated, offensive, and too assertive about being a lesbian.

Also, these mothers related that there were fewer areas which enabled connection with their daughters since their daughters were no longer interested in or wished to share the traditional sex role related activities which had previously brought them together. In addition, these mothers had only the one daughter -- their lesbian daughter.

Only one mother interviewed appeared to have no identifiable sequence or struggle towards acceptance. This woman had guessed that her daughter was a lesbian since her adolescence, watched her daughter go through troubled teen-age years, and waited for disclosure so that they could once again talk openly. She reported a strong belief system in a child's individuality, had prior exposure to lesbians and gay men, and a history of involvement in social justice causes. Also, she was employed as a counselor in a group home for troubled adolescents.

Finally, primary to all of the mothers in the study was their relationship with their daughters and these mothers' sense of self as a mother was enhanced by their continuing relationship with their daughters. Connection with their daughters was a primary source of self-esteem and self-affirmation, and thus an important motivation in the struggle towards acceptance.

Although the sample of the women interviewed was small, what appears to mediate or influence the level of acceptance are a

combination of the following variables or factors: (1) amount of time elapsed since disclosure; (2) commitment to relationship with one's daughter; (3) degree of self-focus and need to have children reflect worth of self; (4) mothers' backgrounds, values and beliefs; (5) conventional versus nontraditional gender role appearance and behaviors of daughters and partners; (6) liking for daughter's partner; (7) increased closeness with daughter following disclosure; (8) assistance from daughters; that is, daughters who help parents obtain information and support, and (9) availability of resources such as information and social support.

Thus, as examples, I believe the process of acceptance would be less difficult for a mother who identified as liberal, believed that children have right to individual choices, was able to tolerate a daughter's nontraditional gender role appearance, felt closer to her daughter following disclosure, and liked her daughter's partner. Acceptance would be more difficult for a mother who tended to be self-focused, whose children were to reflect her worth as a parent, and who had strong beliefs in traditional or conservative values. However, if this mother liked her daughter's partner, and her daughter behaved within the bounds of the traditional feminine role and offered socially approved achievements, a higher level of acceptance might ultimately be possible.

Finally, a low level of acceptance would be the likely outcome for a traditional mother unable to tolerate a nontraditional daughter,

where disclosure is followed by estrangement, and when a daughter's partner is disliked.

Also, there were other themes which both intertwined with and were separate from the issue of lesbianism, and had to do with particular worries or mother-daughter struggles. These themes included daughters' struggles to individuate, as well as maternal concerns over daughters' economic and emotional well-being as self supporting and single women (whether partnered or not). Similar to mothers of single heterosexual daughters, mothers in the study expressed concerns over daughters' ability to find a career, support themselves financially, or support a child; and worried about daughters' possible loneliness if unpartnered, or if they believed daughters were being taken advantage of or treated badly by partners.

Finally, similar to mothers of heterosexual daughters, mothers in the study related feelings of remorse over past mothering interactions, and feared that deficits in parenting might have caused personality difficulties such as depression or low self-esteem.

Issues in Psychotherapy

The results of this study suggest numerous issues which may emerge in psychotherapy with both heterosexual mothers and lesbian daughters in individual as well as family therapy.

Lesbians, if undisclosed to mothers, often begin to debate the possibility of disclosure in therapy and it is helpful to assist these women with exploring family dynamics and attitudes towards difference as well as their mother's personality style, the nature of their relationship, their motivation to disclose, what they wish disclosure to achieve, and their specific fears regarding the outcome of disclosure. Thus therapy can help lesbian clients to determine if disclosure will be beneficial, to plan for the location and timing of disclosure, to predict their mother's responses and how their relationship may change, and to understand what their own subsequent reactions may be to their mother's reactions and if they can tolerate a protracted period of estrangement and conflict.

Because mothers' feelings following disclosure are frequently expressed through behaviors of hurt or angry withdrawal, therapy often becomes the place where lesbian daughters communicate their deepest grief and feelings of loss, betrayal, and abandonment. These feelings can then evoke recall of earlier family relationships and interactions so that the work in therapy may alternate between working through earlier relationship issues and responding to the woman's current pain.

In addition, relationships with mothers often remain a central issue in therapy with many lesbians (as with heterosexual women), and feelings of loss and abandonment can remain primary themes long after disclosure has occurred. Contact with parents is frequently

upsetting (or traumatic) and lesbian daughters need support in order to tolerate and manage issues such as loss of parental approval, relational estrangement, marginalization or exclusion from family life, and attending family events such as celebration of siblings' heterosexual relationships while their own couple relationships remains negated or trivialized.

Thus, therapists can be in position to combine understanding and support in addition to interpreting the many possible motivations, feelings, and complexities connected to mothers' reactions. Moreover, therapists can encourage lesbian daughters to maintain contact and offer information on books and parents' groups, but also to set limits if necessary and not tolerate abusive interactions.

Mothers of lesbians who wish to come to terms with their child's homosexuality often approach counselors for help and understanding in adjusting to a child's homosexuality, and the multiple tasks of therapy include understanding mothers' experience of loss, assisting with lessening of feelings of shame and maternal guilt, supporting the relationship between mother and daughter, and respecting parental readiness as to behaviors supportive of acceptance as well as encouraging limit setting if a daughter's behaviors cause intense discomfort. In addition, it is crucial that therapists become a resource for information such as reading material as well as additional support systems such as parents' groups and P-FLAG.

Thus, the therapist familiar with the sequence of parental acceptance, the variables predictive of acceptance, and the counterparts of shared experiences of heterosexual mothers and lesbian daughters can be an invaluable source of understanding and suggestion to both mothers and daughters. Moreover, she is in position to encourage lesbian daughters to take an appropriately active stance in their mothers' process in order to encourage and challenge their mothers to take steps crucial to the process of acceptance.

Conclusion

The mothers in this study were a unique group of women who consciously worked to tolerate stigmatization and to adjust to a daughter's lesbianism. Although these mothers were at different levels of acceptance, each had engaged in some activity supportive of acceptance, and most had taken a stand against the dominant ideology and societal view of homosexuality as deviance, and were actively committed to political and/or social activism in support of other parents and the rights and freedom of all lesbians and gay men. Thus, these mothers had determined to bridge the invented divide or socially constructed division between female heterosexuality and lesbianism and not to live "worlds apart".

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